MYSTICAL ECOLOGY: FOOD AND DRINK AS SPIRITUAL NOURISHMENT IN THE MYSTICAL ORTHODOX TRADITION

CONSTANTINOS ATHANASOPOULOS

Research Affiliate, Department of Philosophy
Open University, UK
c.athanasopoulos@open.ac.uk

Abstract

After I discuss what I mean by Orthodox Mysticism in Philosophy and Theology, I sketch the traditional contemporary philosophical and theological views about Ecology and the use of food and drink for bodily nourishment. Following this, I present the views of three Orthodox mystics on food and drink as spiritual nourishment and how they differ from traditional contemporary philosophical and theological views. Finally, I discuss why we should be based on the Orthodox mystical views on the use of food and drink for a more coherent and ethically and theologically justified ecological perspective.

1. The Context of Orthodox Mysticism in Philosophy and Theology

If one searches in a dictionary, one can find a common idea behind possible definitions of mysticism: there is a direct and not externally verifiable and observable communication with the divine, a communication, I want to claim, that does not follow the laws of traditional logic (chiefly among them the law of non-contradiction), nor is the result of deductive reasoning. If seen in this way, it is not surprising that mysticism has met with considerable suspicion by contemporary philosophers and theologians and either has been totally disregarded or has

been discussed via the methods of traditional science, i.e., as an aberrant phenomenon of sociological or psychological religious behaviour.

It is no accident, for example, that Jerome Gellman in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, trying to discuss how philosophers use mysticism, writes:

> 'Philosophers have focused on such topics as the classification of mystical experiences, their nature in different religions and mystical traditions, to what extent mystical experiences are conditioned by a mystic's language and culture, and whether mystical experiences furnish evidence for the truth of their contents. Some philosophers have begun to question the emphasis on experience in favor of examining the entire mystical complex (See Jantzen, 1994 and 1995, and section 9 below). Since this article pertains to mysticism and philosophy, it will concentrate chiefly on topics philosophers have discussed concerning mystical experience.'

It is important to note here that Gellman focuses on the philosophical importance of the mystical *experience* (which for him in its philosophical, narrow, sense is a unificatory experience; see Gellman, 2004); it is also important that he decides to discuss the (false for my perspective) dilemma of mystical experience vs. the 'entire mystical complex' as rejected by feminist authors (Jantzen), who think that mysticism is permeated with *androcentric* bias. Gellman, in another work of his (Gellman, 2004), explains that even though the *perennial* (i.e., the identification of common mystical experiences across cultures) and the *constructivist* (i.e., the reduction of the mystical experience into a social construct) approaches to mysticism are not very successful, his favoured *naturalistic* interpretation of mystical experience, i.e., that the mystical experience cannot be explained by supernatural means, is more attractive for a contemporary philosopher. However, I have to point out that his reducing mysticism into an *experience*, i.e., as something that can be analysed, described and discussed by the rationalistic and quantifiable methods of traditional science is both an evidence of this philosophical and theological 'suspicion' towards mysticism and a reason for Gellman's dilemma: if x is something that has been discussed primarily by *androcentric* science, then of course it can be classified in 'either-or' terms, when compared to feministic approaches to religion.

Other contemporary philosophers try to establish the rules and norms of the *language use*, when it attempts to describe mystical experience, only to find that:

> 'This leaves us with a discomforting worry. If logic is inapplicable to the mystic's discourse, does that not come very close to saying that discriminations cannot be made in this field between sense and nonsense, the sound and the unsound? The literal approach must be, for a philosopher, a desperate measure, a last resort only. To treat it as anything else would be methodologically perverse. Apart from the difficulties of discrimination, where logic is inoperative, the approach demands an unshakable prior conviction that the mystic's paradoxes are to be taken at their face value as reports of veridical insights. Here there is much that can be challenged.' (Hepburn, 2006, p.456).

So, one can safely draw the conclusion here that contemporary philosophical approaches to mysticism attempt to reduce the phenomenon into quantifiable and rational (i.e., following the laws of traditional logic) forms of describable behaviour. But is this valid? I think not. Primarily because the mystics and more particularly the Orthodox mystics think that this is impossible (as we will soon see). But are the contemporary theological discussions about mysticism in a better state?

Some may say they are, if one takes into consideration the views of Ralph Norman, who concludes that:

> 'Mysticism, then, is a fundamental aspect of the Christian tradition. I have shown how it is intimately linked with a number of historic Christian doctrines, and how a re-appreciation of mysticism can lead to fruitful and creative insights into central Christian doctrines like the Trinity, Incarnation and Ascension that pose a challenge to much modern theologizing. Further, I have shown how the Christian mystical tradition creates a useful locus for theological exploration of the postmodern. If Christian doctrine is to interact with contemporary thought, then this is certainly an area that needs further investigation. Perhaps most importantly, my description of the transformation of the definition of mysticism in recent years reminds modern theology of the usefulness of historical theology. All too often contemporary theology looks back on earlier periods through the lenses of received opinions that can be shown to be faulty. And yet, when the tradition is revisited, one discovers there a basis which informs the most up-to-date thought. Perhaps, after all, the premodern and postmodern are peculiarly alike, and if theology is to find a way through the thought of a Derrida or Deleuze, its best bet is to re-adopt the insights of the Christian mystical tradition.' (Norman, 2004, p. 464).

So it can be claimed, on the basis of the views of the theologian referred to, that the theological view on mysticism is more close to the Orthodox one, since: a) he thinks that mysticism is a valuable and irreplaceable element in Christian theology, and b) it cannot thus be reducible to the

experience of the mystical. But is the majority opinion of contemporary theologians in agreement with this? A much too hasty embrace of the postmodern theological discourse, which is evident in the above passage, is an indication that its author is in a minority position, trying to appease the spirit of theological postmodernists or at least postmodern sympathizers. Taking into consideration that postmodernists have severely criticized both Christianity and the Christian ecclesiastical tradition, emphasizing and highlighting the significant differences in interpretation and relativizing theological truth, the conclusion mentioned above seems a bit self-contradictory and more of a compromise at all costs. But, the obvious question seems to be here: *why we should compromise truth*?

As we have seen from our brief excursion into the philosophical and theological literature discussing mysticism, if we try to find mysticism's true value and importance through much of contemporary philosophy and theology, we have a difficult (if not impossible) task on our hands, since, for the majority of contemporary philosophical and theological discussions, either mysticism is reduced into an experience that can be described by the methods of natural science, or at best it has to be accommodated in the conceptual and ideological contexts of contemporary highly debatable viewpoints (such as postmodernity) which create more problems for the appreciation of the value and importance of mysticism than actually help us to understand it in its own right. Having thus arrived at an impasse, we can proceed now to how we can think in positive terms about the Orthodox approach to mysticism.

2. The Areopagitic Texts

Some of the first important texts to consult for an Orthodox understanding of Mysticism are those attributed to the famous mystical father of the Church, St. Dionysius the Areopagite, the famous student of St. Paul the Apostle. I shall not enlarge on the issue of whether these texts belong to St. Dionysius the Areopagite, or to another much later author anonymous to us. I shall only mention that according to standard commentaries, the texts have some anachronisms and refer to historical events much later than the life of St. Dionysius; suffice it to say however, that they are in spirit very close to St. Paul's teaching about Christian dogma (and this argument has been advanced by commentators like John of Skythopolis and St. Maximus the Confessor, who were more closer in time to the time of the first circulation of the texts) and thus, I shall, on the basis of this evidence, refer to them as St. Dionysius the Areopagite's texts and thus

"areopagitic" (see also on this Florovsky 1987). Now, a few things need to be stressed in relation to these texts.

Firstly, they discuss a peculiar form of epistemology, which does not obey traditional laws of reasoning and logic. It is important to highlight that one of Dionysius' great contributions to Mystical Theology, as we know it today, is his theory about *Γνόφος Αγνωσίας*: *Γνόφος* or *gnofos* has been translated as 'the divine gloom' [or 'cloud' or 'mist']; *Αγνωσία* or *agnosia* can be best translated as 'non-knowledge'. We should emphasize that this *Agnosia* is not ignorance (as some have translated the term). It is a peculiar form of knowing that is ineffable and unknowable to the non-Mystic; it is however communicable from one mystic to the other, through their common point of reference: the triune God.

This indicates that we have here a peculiar form of epistemology that is quite alien to traditional philosophical approaches to knowledge and reasoning.

A *first key feature* in this epistemology is its peculiar *doxastic proportionality*. We can see this idea outlined in the very first chapter of the text *On Divine Names*.

In the following passage, we see Dionysius' claim that his Theology is not based on the persuasiveness of man's wisdom, but that it is *proportionally* limited by the theologian's superior union of reasoning and intuition:

> (*On Divine Names*, Chapter 1, Section 1):
> '...we shall establish the truth of the things spoken concerning God, not in the persuasive words of man's wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit-moved power of the Theologians, by aid of which we are brought into contact with things unutterable and unknown, in a manner unutterable and unknown, *in proportion* to the superior *union of the reasoning and intuitive faculty and operation within us*. […]' (transl. J. Parker)

A *second key feature* is the role of Agnosia in this new epistemology. In Areopagitic terms:

> (On *Divine Names*, Chapter 1- Section 1)
> '…For Agnosia, [non-knowledge] of its superessentiality is above reason and mind and essence—to it must we attribute the superessential science, so far aspiring to the Highest, as the ray of the supremely Divine imparts itself, whilst we restrain ourselves in our approach to the higher glories by prudence and piety as regards things Divine […].

> For, if we must place any confidence in the All Wise and most trustworthy Theology, things Divine are revealed and contemplated in proportion to the capacity of each of the minds, since the supremely Divine Goodness distributes Divinely its immeasurableness (as that which cannot be contained) with a justice which preserves those whose capacity is limited […].
> […] For, as things intelligible cannot be comprehended and contemplated by things of sense, and things uncompounded and unformed by things compounded and formed; and the intangible and unshaped formlessness of things without body, by those formed according to the shapes of bodies; in accordance with the self-same analogy of the truth, the superessential Illimitability is placed above things essential, and the Unity above mind above the Minds; and the One above conception is inconceivable to all conceptions; and the Good above word is unutterable by word…' (transl. J. Parker)

A *third key feature* of this new epistemology is that it is embedded within the new metaphysics, ontology, ethics and language that the areopagetic texts outline; the use of specific divine names (such as 'Light' or 'Good') is symbolic of the humanly unknowable realm of the triune God: man can know *only what is revealed to him via God's grace and only while in ecstatic love with Him.* We see this feature outlined in the passages below:

> (*On Divine Names*, Chapter 4, Section 5)
> 'Let us now then celebrate the spiritual Name of Light, under Which we contemplate the Good, and declare that He, the Good, is called spiritual [33] Light, on the ground that He fills every supercelestial mind with spiritual light, and expels all ignorance and error from all souls in which they may be, and imparts to them all sacred light, and cleanses their mental vision from the mist which envelops them, from ignorance, and stirs up and unfolds those enclosed by the great weight of darkness, and imparts, at first, a [39] measured radiance; then, whilst they taste, as it were, the light, and desire it more, more fully gives Itself, and more abundantly enlightens them, because "they have loved much," and ever elevates them to things in advance, as befits the analogy of each for aspiration.'

> (*On Divine Names*, Chapter 4, Section 13)
> But Divine Love is ecstatic, not permitting (any) to be lovers of themselves, but of those beloved. They shew this too, the superior by becoming mindful of the inferior; and the equals by their mutual coherence; and the inferior, by a more divine respect towards things superior. Wherefore also, Paul the Great, when possessed by the Divine Love, and participating in its ecstatic power, says with inspired lips, "I live no longer, but Christ lives in me." As a true lover, and beside himself, as he says, to Almighty God, and not living the life of himself, but the life of

> the Beloved, as a life excessively esteemed. One might make bold to say even this, on behalf of truth, that the very Author of all things, by the beautiful and good love of everything, through an overflow of His loving [49] goodness, becomes out of Himself, by His providences for all existing things, and is, as it were, caused by goodness and affection and love, and is led down from the Eminence above all, and surpassing all, to being in all, as befits an ecstatic superessential power centered in Himself. […] And, in short, the lovable is of the Beautiful and Good, and Love preexisted both in the Beautiful and Good, and on account of the Beautiful and Good, is and takes Being (transl. J. Parker).

A *fourth key feature* is its unifying character. Trying to circumvent the specific problems in Hellenistic philosophy in terms of human will and agency, and more specifically how knowing and willing good can be one and the same while in ecstatic love, Dionysius emphasizes the unifying force of the mystical illumination. We can see this in the following text:

> (*On Divine Names*, Chapter 4, Section 6).
> The Good then above every light is called spiritual Light, as fontal ray, and stream of light welling over, shining upon every mind, above, around [34], and in the world, from its fullness, and renewing their whole mental powers, and embracing them all by its over-shadowing; and being above all by its exaltation; and in one word, by embracing and having previously and pre-eminently the whole sovereignty of the light-dispensing faculty, as being source of light and above all light, and by comprehending in itself all things intellectual, and all things rational, and making them one altogether. For as ignorance puts asunder those who have gone astray, so the presence of the spiritual light is collective and unifying of those being enlightened, both perfecting and further turning them towards the true Being, by turning them from the many notions and collecting the various views, or, to speak more correctly, fancies, into one true, pure and uniform knowledge, and by filling them with light, one and unifying.

3. St. Symeon the New Theologian

The mystical tradition that was created in the East, as a direct influence of the areopagitic texts, found its most profound Eastern Orthodox defender in St. Symeon the New Theologian (949-1022), a mystical theologian of such an influence on the Orthodox Church that he is proclaimed as 'the New Theologian', indicating that his work is of comparable validity to the work of St. John the Apostle and Evangelist and St. Gregory Nazienzen. St. Symeon not only consolidated and further elucidated the areopagitic corpus and school of thought and theology, but he enriched it with poems and treatises of great value and importance especially for the development

of the Hesychastic Movement in the 13th and 14th centuries (within the context of which Nicholaos Cabasilas, the third key Orthodox mystical author that we will discuss here, matured and wrote his treatises). Key ideas expressed through the texts of St. Symeon are the following:

1. Humans (even though created) can see and unite with the triune God during this life (even though this union is short-lived while in the body).
2. The mystical experience is not only of the soul but encompasses the whole person (both mind and body). More specifically, for St. Symeon, through the mystical union of man and God, man gains via divine grace something from the characteristic unity of the triune God, becoming, in essence, a threefold hypostasis, fulfilling thus the '*κατ' εικόνα*' or 'according to Thy image' (*τρισυπόστατος*: *νους* or *nous*, *ψυχή* or soul, *λόγος* or *logos*, reason): man becomes one with God (θέσει) with his body, his soul, and the Holy Spirit of Whom he partakes (see *Cat*. 15, 72-77; *Hymn* 44 (324), and Krivocheine 1986, p.289)
3. The heart (and not the intellect nor the mind) is elevated as the organ that we have to be primarily concerned with and it is through it and with it that the mystical experience can be achieved in this life (indicating a firm belief in the psychosomatic mystical experience and transformation).
4. Finally, absolute freedom for both God and man is confirmed: man can only attract the mystical vision through the purification and strengthening of the heart and the senses and he can only achieve it if and when God wills it. It is not only dependent on the continuous struggle of the man but also on the will of the triune God. The following two texts show these ideas in detail. In the first, the union with the triune God and its mode of attainment is outlined in a mystical poem:

St. Symeon's mystical poem: 'What is this awesome mystery'
What is this awesome mystery
that is taking place within me?
I can find no words to express it;
my poor hand is unable to capture it
in describing the praise and glory that belong
to the One who is above all praise,
and who transcends every word...
My intellect sees what has happened,
but it cannot explain it.
It can see, and wishes to explain,

but can find no word that will suffice;
for what it sees is invisible and entirely formless,
simple, completely uncompounded,
unbounded in its awesome greatness.
What I have seen is the totality recapitulated as one,
received not in essence but by participation.
Just as if you lit a flame from a flame,
it is the whole flame you receive.
(transl. by John Anthony McGuckin)

In the following text, the importance on the use of the heart in prayer is further highlighted:

St. Symeon the New Theologian: The Three Ways of Attention and Prayer
[The third way of attention and prayer.]
The third way of attention and prayer is then this: the mind should guard the heart in the time of prayer and always stay inside it. From there, from the depths of the heart, it should then lift up the prayers to God. For once it tries inside the heart and tastes and is soothed--as the Lord is good!--then the mind will never want to leave the place of the heart. It will there repeat the words of Peter the apostle: "It is wonderful for us to be here!" [Mt 17:4, Mk 9:5, Lk 9:33] Then it will always wish to look inside the heart, remaining there and pushing aside and expelling all the concepts which are planted by the Devil. To those who have not realised this work of salvation and remain unaware of it, this will most of the times seem very hard and unpleasant. But those who have tasted its sweetness and enjoyed the pleasure inside the depths of their hearts, they all cry together with Paul: "What could ever come between us and the love of God?" [Rm 8:38-39]
[...]
[QUESTION. Why is it not possible to achieve all this through the first and the second way?]
As we have repeatedly said, the first and the second way do not bring any spiritual advancement. When we want to build a house, we do not make the roof first and then lay the foundation--for this is impossible!--but we firstly lay the foundation, then build the house and then add the roof. We should do the same in spiritual matters: first lay the foundation, which is to guard the heart and cast out its weaknesses; then build the spiritual house, which is to cast out the evil spirits fighting us through our senses; finally, having overcome the war as soon as possible, add the roof, which is to depart from all things earthly, and give ourselves completely to God. Thus we complete our spiritual house in Christ our God, to whom all glory is due, unto the ages of ages. Amen.' (transl. by Demetrios S. Skagias)

From the above discussion of Orthodox Mysticism it is evident that there are five main features in Orthodox Mysticism which make it a *distinct mystical approach:*

a) It cannot be described in terms of subjectivism vs. objectivism (both in terms of epistemology and ethics).
b) The mystical experience is *veridical* (i.e., we can say when we have it), satisfying in this way partly the demand made by some contemporary philosophers (e.g., see Hepburn above), but it does not obey the laws of traditional logic and reasoning (there is a new epistemology involved).
c) Body and soul are not divided, but they are unified in the mystical union of God and man.
d) There is *no intellectualism nor a conceptualism* of any kind, because all reasoning, imagination and memory of sensory images are to be avoided; the organ of chief importance for the mystic is the heart and not the mind. It is important to note in relation to this feature, that Orthodox mysticism is not some kind of sensualism or emotionalism, since emotions and senses of the body are also to be avoided in the attempt to unite with the triune God.
e) The mystical union can be achieved while alive and with the body; later hesychastic mystics, such as St. Gregory Palamas (1296-1359) and Nicholaos Cabasilas (1319/23-c.1391) emphasize that this union is achieved via the divine energies and not the divine essence. The Ninth Ecumenical Synod (1341-1351) made this new mystical idea part of the Orthodox dogma and made prevalent the mystical tendencies in the Orthodox Church. The Orthodox Church celebrates this every year during the fasting period before Easter: on the Sunday after the Sunday of Orthodoxy (during which we celebrate the canonical re-institution of the ecclesiastical use of the icons) it is part of the *Typikon* (the ecclesiastical order of the daily services) that the Decisions of the Synod are read in the Church, so that the Orthodox believers remember that this is part of Orthodox Christian dogma.

4. The Philosophy of Food and Drink

In contemporary philosophical discussions about the ethics of consumption of food and drink, there is a growing tendency to provide arguments in terms of the *rights* and *duties* of the people and beings involved, either recognizing in them *intrinsic qualities*, which can justify

the existence of our duties towards them and their rights for respect by us, or by linking them to the rights and duties of others, who have some interest in the consumed animals' fate or well-being. So, for example, in the case of some philosophical arguments put forward by vegetarians and/or vegans, animals should not be consumed and in general all suffering of theirs should be restricted, if not avoided at all costs, on the basis of their inherent moral qualities and their wellbeing. This places ethical restrictions on what we can eat and drink and in some way places a *fast* upon us on moral considerations. Thus, in general, the *deep ecology* and *vegan* argument for an abstention from all meat and dairy products is that we should not eat meat nor drink milk, because this action makes animals feel pain or discomfort. For anthropocentric ecologists the argument becomes that eating meat/ milk/ dairy products reduces the well-being of other people in the developing world (since the resources used to feed animals can be used more efficiently to feed starving people through agricultural products that are not derived from animals). In both cases there is some sort of a contract involved (between us and the animals, or between us and the other people in less developed countries) and through the consumption of specific foods and drinks we break the moral rule that binds us to obey the rules of this contract.

Some philosophers (for example, Peter Singer and Tom Regan) actually go to the point of making parallelisms between the 'speciesism' that existed between people of different colours and races in the recent past and the *biological speciesism* that exists between humans and the rest of the animal kingdom (cf. Singer 1975; Regan and Singer 1976). They make the claim that the same moral rules that bind the different human races and form a contract that is sanctioned by international legal documents and agreements (such as the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights), bind humans as well to the rest of the animal kingdom. This approach has influenced a large part of the relevant current bibliography on the ethics of food and the 70s texts discussing the 'speciesism' approach are now standard textbooks in Environmental Ethics and any set bibliographies on the Philosophy of Food and Drink.

It has been pointed out however, by critics from the early 80s onwards, that the Singer-Regan approach cannot offer convincing arguments in its support. It is not only that the contract theory that it alludes to is fallaciously entertained (since there is a need for a further proof that animals – or other people concerned – can take part in such a contract and that they can both represent and promote their interests through this contract); it is also that for many adherents of vegetarianism or veganism,

the contract theory (or any theory based on duties and rights) is not a good way to put forward their viewpoint and arguments for the intrinsic value and sacredness of animals, plants and the other beings that exist in the world, but are not created nor produced by humans. Such critics make the point that even if a human being was the last person on this earth with the possibility of destroying earth and all the beings on it after his/her death, it would be morally wrong to do so, not through any contracts (which would not hold after death in any case), but on the grounds that nature and every non-human living creature is intrinsically valuable with a value that is independent of any human consideration, making them *sacred*. They also point out that resorting to anthropocentric values and moral qualities (for example moral virtues or elaborate rule and/or contract theories) would not satisfy their requirements, since they claim that non-human creatures cannot be examined in human terms and human categories of thought.

It is my considered opinion that the contemporary moral-philosophical discourse, as we know it today, cannot cope with the pressure of such arguments and it needs to have access to a religious perspective, which will allow for the *re-sanctification* of nature that is necessary to get philosophers out of the philosophical impasse.

But not just any religious perspective will meet the demand for a significantly different approach. The religious perspective that will bring the philosophers out of this theoretical difficulty must be a perspective that allows for a *significantly non-human centered/directed perspective* to come into the investigation and help in the formulation of a *less anthropocentric* approach (both in terms of epistemology and in terms of ethics) to the issue of respect towards natural beings in this world.

This leads us back to the Orthodox mystical way of seeing our role in the universe and our goal in life. As we indicated above, this mysticism provides a new epistemology and ethics, which is significantly different from the contemporary philosophical and religious alternatives, both in terms of the less anthropocentric aims and the more *soteriological* perspective it gives for creation and the role of creation in the achievement of the mystical union between God and man. Let us see this in more detail.

5. The Orthodox Mystics on Food and Drink as Spiritual Nourishment: St Nicholaos Cabasilas on the Mysteries of the Church

From the above discussion of the main characteristics of Orthodox mysticism, it is obvious that Orthodox mysticism cannot be anthropocentric nor follow the established and traditional rules of human reasoning, if it is to achieve the desired goal of union with the triune God. It is also evident that humans can achieve a new awareness of their role in creation and of how they should behave towards other creatures, during the ***ecstatic rapture*** that the mystic way entails. This is clear from both the texts of St. Dionysius the Areopagite and those of St. Symeon the New Theologian.

Actually, St. Symeon the New Theologian emphasises that any kind of animosity or improper attitude towards creation is the result of Adam's fall from heaven and comes as a result from it. Mystical union with the triune God will not only return man to the mode of existence he had before the Fall, but it will return in him the wonder and full respect with which he needs to regard God's Creation (see *Hymn* 32, and Kesselopoulos 2001, p.81). He further on claims that the use of material goods and creation for man's survival is not evil but it should be carried out with no 'desire of the flesh', no 'desire of the eyes' and no 'vain thoughts' (*Catechetical Orations*, 5, and Kesselopoulos 2001, p.121). This further supports St. Symeon's conviction that, if a man is to be united with God mystically, he must do so with a complete transformation of his desires, arrived at through ecstatic love towards the Creator and the consequent abstention from any thought and behaviour that is not directed by this ecstatic love towards the Creator. Man thus becomes not only a guardian of Creation through asceticism but considers it as an invaluable means for his salvation; this forces upon him a transformation of his desires and the way he looks at Creation. This mystical perspective has many advantages over the traditional contemporary approaches to the problem of feasting in a world that requires fasting: Firstly, it is not dividing the world into the realm of the subjective and the realm of the objective, or (put in other terms) between the body and the mind, the material and the immaterial. As we saw, both matter (body) and spirit are united in the mystical union in a new form of hypostatic existence. Secondly, it allows for a new non-anthropocentric epistemology and ethics: man does not exist for himself, but *for God*, and Creation is the place which God created for man's salvation. In his ecstatic love towards God, man cannot regard the world as

existing for his own means and interests but through his ecstatic love towards God.

Even though these advantages are a real improvement on the philosophical and theological impasse in contemporary debates, how is the demand for sanctification of nature to be met with this perspective in mind?

Deep Ecology vegetarians and vegans here may protest that this mystical standpoint may be interpreted as indicating that man has the role of a simple attendant or house keeper and, thus, Nature may be regarded as part of the household items such a house keeper attends to, with no further responsibility or value to him.

Nicholaos Cabasilas claims that it is here that man's role in the Divine Eucharist as returning Creation to its rightful place can be most clearly envisaged. Man, in the process of the Divine Leitourgy, and while performing the sacrament of Eucharist, offers to God what is made by God (the priest announces in the Eucharist while offering the Holy Gifts that he offers them as of God's to God: '*τα σα εκ των σων σοι προσφέρομεν*'). Cabasilas stresses that the part of Creation that is offered on the altar is not man's but God's. By offering to God what is God's, man enters into a mystical union with the triune God and becomes united with Him through grace, placing Creation in the proper *soteriological* perspective. By re-consecrating nature and creation within the process of the Divine Eucharist, man finds his true role in Creation, becomes light himself and mystically unites with God, radiating light back into creation. Man does not exist to use nature and creatures but to consecrate them and refer them back to their rightful Owner and Creator. And man, according to Cabasilas, can only do this once he lives through the mystic life of the consecrating Church and its mysteries. It is only through the mystical realization of man's failure to be a true son and creature of God that man can realize and achieve the mystical union with God (Cabasilas, 1960, pp. 116-8).

Through the mysteries of the Church and most importantly the Divine Eucharist, where bread and wine are offered and become the Blood and Body of Christ, man becomes holy again and, with the return to his holiness, he can further sanctify nature and offer it to God. Cabasilas here is in full agreement with the Orthodox Mystics before him, in claiming that the 'naming' of Creation by man during Creation (in the book of

Genesis) is part of this re-sanctification of Nature. Man was created to sanctify Nature and not destroy it, according to the Orthodox Mystics.

It is important to emphasise that what is offered in the Eucharist is not owned by man. Man is utterly naked, defenseless, with no justification and without pretence, when facing his Creator. The mystery of the all powerful grace and mercy, thus, becomes the true *soteriological* and *sanctifying* force.

Man performs a *reasonable* sacrifice of his will over things and himself to gain the object of his ecstatic love, without losing his personal and hypostatic characteristics, so that he can find what he ecstatically loves and desires. Trying to explain the words 'reasonable sacrifice' in the Divine Leitourgy, Cabasilas claims that the sacrifice is *reasonable* because it is *mystical*: the priest, by pronouncing the appropriate words, does all that is necessary to make the offered part of Creation holy again and suitable for sacrifice to God, bringing man back into his true role in Creation, in accordance with the book of *Genesis* in Old Testament (Cabasilas, 1960, p.116). According to Cabasilas, 'the *sacrifice* is truly *an act* and *a reality*' and even though the priest only says specific names and words, these become significant and mean far more than perceived by human ears, through the mystery of divine grace, in the same way that in *Genesis*, man by naming nature is not just saying names and words empty of mystical and theological significance. It is important to emphasise that this *use of names* and *words* lies within the mystical tradition of the Areopagetic texts. It is through the names of God that we can gain a mystical awareness of His *apophatic* and *cataphatic* realization and, thus, be led into a mystical union with Him. In the same way, it is through the *naming* process and, via this process, the re-sanctification of Nature, that we can achieve the mystical union of God with creation. Man thus becomes *synergos* (i.e., collaborator) in salvation with God, gaining himself a new *soteriological* perspective.

Cabasilas, in a text where he explains the difference between the new and the old Adam (man after and before the Fall), put forward the following ideas: the true bread (*ο αληθώς άρτος*) is Jesus Christ, who, in the same way that the usual bread strengthens man's heart and gives him physical strength, came down to us and brought us a new form of life and strength. It is Him (Jesus) that we should strive to incorporate within us constantly, to be preserved in the constant and continuous time of hunger (λιμόν) that

we live during our current lives (*Patrologia Graeca*, vol. 150, pp.680-684).

This comes in striking similarity with Dionysius' *Epistle to Titus* and what is claimed there about the symbolic and mystical meaning of food, solid and liquid:

> *Epistle to Titus, Hierarch* (Section IV)
> But what is the solid food and what the liquid? For the Good Wisdom is celebrated as at once bestowing and providing these. I suppose, then, that the solid food is suggestive of the intellectual and abiding perfection and sameness, within which things Divine are participated as a stable, and strong, and unifying, and indivisible knowledge, by those contemplating organs of sense, by which the most Divine Paul, after partaking of wisdom, imparts his really solid nourishment; but that the liquid is suggestive of the stream, at once flowing through and to all; eager to advance, and further conducting those who are properly nourished as to goodness, through things variegated and many and divided, to the simple and invariable knowledge of God. Wherefore the divine and spiritually perceived Oracles are likened to dew, and water, and to milk, and wine, and honey; on account of their life-producing power, as in water; and growth-giving, as in milk; and reviving, as in wine; and both purifying and preserving, as in honey. For these things the Divine Wisdom gives to those approaching it, and furnishes and fills to overflowing a stream of ungrudging and unfailing good cheer. This, then, is the veritable good cheer; and, on this account, it is celebrated, as at once life-giving and nourishing and perfecting.

6. Conclusions

From our brief excursion into Orthodox Mysticism, as found primarily in the mystical theology and philosophy of the Areopagetic texts, St. Symeon the New Theologian, and Nicholaos Cabasilas, we can see that there is another way of dealing with the issues of feasting and fasting that avoids the difficult impasse traditional contemporary philosophical and theological discourses are faced with, when having to deal with an apparent lack of respect towards creatures and nature in general.

Feasting and fasting, as primarily concerned with the way humans grow and sustain themselves, should not be treated as unimportant nor as not directly concerned with the way we can know and understand ourselves. Mystical Metaphysics and Ontology here are interconnected with Mystical Anthropology and Ethics. Within Orthodox Mysticism, Asceticism exists not for the mortification of the flesh, but for the re-orientation of our

intellectual and volitional powers. Food and drink thus become means of spiritual nourishment: the priest in the mystery of the Divine Eucharist offers parts of creation to God in the form of a 'reasonable' sacrifice, but neither the gifts offered nor the words used belong to the priest, who is with no pretence and no justification.

Creation becomes autonomous and has a separate existence from God, only when it lacks the ecstatic love, the true and chief criterion of the mystical way. Creation and man, in this world, void of ecstatic love, thus, become both alienated and alienating. Both feasting and fasting should become one and have as their goal the mystical transformation of the human will, so that it can unite and reside in God's will.

Now, can the result of our investigation into Orthodox Mysticism be compatible with the philosophical and theological views on mysticism, with which we started our investigation? Well, partly yes. Firstly, we have established that in Orthodox Mysticism we can be veridical about our mystical union and this is one of its key features. This can be used to avoid difficulties stemming from the vague and relativistic attitude of many contemporary philosophical and theological schools of thought. Secondly, we saw that another key feature of Orthodox mysticism is its unificatory aspect and its simplicity. Within the mystical union the mystic does not lose his personhood; however his will and intellect do unite with God's. In this way both simplicity and unity are maintained and achieved.

All in all, however, we need to emphasise that in the new ontology, epistemology and ethics that is put forward in Orthodox Mysticism, traditional philosophical and theological categories need to be revised and transformed in order to accurately describe what is achieved in and through the Orthodox mystical union.

References

Dionysius the Areopagite, *Works* (1897), transl. by John Parker, James Parker and Co. Publ., London (can be also found in: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, http://www.ccel.org/ccel/dionysius/works.html)

Florovsky, George (1987), *The Byzantine Ascetic and Spiritual Fathers*, Belmont, MA.

Gellman, Jerome (2005), 'Mysticism', *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/mysticism/#1 (accessed 15/11/08).

Gellman, Jerome (2004), 'Mysticism and religious experience', in William J. Wainwright, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Religion*, 2004, pp.138-167.

Hepburn, Ronald W. (2006), 'Mysticism: Nature and Assessment of', in Donald M. Borchert, ed., *Thomson-Gale Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2nd ed., Thomson Gale Publ., London , p. 453-461.

Kesselopoulos, A. (2001), *Man and the Environment*, transl. by E. Theokritoff, St. Vladimir's Seminar Press, N.Y.

Krivocheine, Basil (1986), *In the light of Christ*, transl. by A. P. Gythiel, St. Vladimir's Seminar Press, N.Y.

McGuckin, John Anthony (2003), *The Book of Mystical Chapters: Meditations on the Soul's Ascent, from the Desert Fathers and Other Early Christian Contemplatives*, Shambhala.

Nicholaos Cabasilas (1960), *A Commentary on the Divine Leitourgy*, transl. by J. M. Hussey and P. A. McNulty, SPCK, London.

Norman, Ralph (2004), 'Rediscovery of Mysticism', in Gareth Jones, ed., *The Blackwell Companion to Modern Theology*, Blackwell, Oxford, pp.449-465.

Regan, Tom, and Singer, Peter, eds. (1976), *Animal Rights and Human Obligations*, Prentice-Hall.

Singer, Peter (1975), *Animal Liberation*, New York Review, N.Y.

Symeon the New Theologian, The *Three Ways of Attention and Prayer*, transl. by Demetrios S. Skagias, *Myriobiblos*, http://www.myriobiblos.gr/texts/english/symeon_threeways.html (accessed 10/11/08)